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ABSTRACT

Polish university programs in English as a foreign language (EFL) contain a discussion course whose usual format is student presentations on an assigned topic of general interest. However, the communicative approach has made teachers more sensitive to the authenticity and suitability of the situations used for classroom role-playing. The approach has provided answers on how to develop discussion skills, not on what to discuss, particularly in EFL classes. Whereas many materials have the student acting as a visitor in an English-speaking country, most Polish students have not visited those countries and would be cast more appropriately in the role of a Polish native receiving English-speaking visitors. In addition, most topics introduced in texts are inappropriate for Polish classroom use because of their controversial nature or their unfamiliarity. Instead, the topics should be general enough to have some real appeal to both the students and native English-speakers. A useful approach is to provide students with glossed texts of general interest, followed by recorded discussions of the subject by native speakers, as from a British radio broadcast. (MSE)

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DISCUSSION CLASSES AT UNIVERSITY LEVEL

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Discussion classes at university level

English studies in Poland involve a practical oral course called "discussion". This course is taught to the fourth year students. They are at or slightly below the level of the Cambridge Certificate of Proficiency Examination.

In the traditional format of the course the teacher chose a topic of general interest and nominated a student to present his/her views on the subject.

The Communicative Approach, however, has made us sensitive to such problems as the roles people play in interactions and the authenticity of situations in which language is used. We have been made aware that discussion classes should be set in particular situational contexts and that they should concern issues about which people talk and hold different opinions.

I claim that the Communicative Approach has given us answers **how** to develop the skill of discussion by means of various communicative techniques but it has not answered the question about the **content** of discussion classes, particularly in TEFL situations. Moreover, the majority of oral skills teaching materials are unsatisfactory from the perspective of EFL teachers and students (cf.Cook 1983).

If we are to develop the skill of discussion, we have to take into consideration our students` **needs** as well as relevant discussion **topics**. The needs are determined by the roles students may play while using English, and the topics by social, educational and cultural contexts of learning English.

Polish students are first of all likely to use English (or any other language for that matter) in their own country. They are likely to act as interpreters, guides and hosts to foreigners who use English as their native tongue or as a lingua franca.

Most role-plays in communicative teaching materials, however,

take place in English speaking countries, where the roles required are those of native speakers and ESL students. All these roles may be beyond the experience of Polish students, who have never been to English speaking countries.

It seems that the Communicative Approach and EL teaching materials should take into account such contexts of language use where the language used by native speakers of English is that of people in the roles of visitors and tourists rather than of native speakers in their own country. These roles, as model roles, should be fully scripted and as close to the authentic language as possible.

The roles of non-native speakers, however, should be open-ended. That is where our students, playing the roles of Polish people who communicate in English with native English speakers visiting their own country, could use their English creatively, in an authentic setting, and where the language output of the students could be modelled on the language input of native speakers.

I believe that students who can use appropriate English in conversations with native speakers of English visiting their own country will be able to communicate successfully, at the same level of sophistication, in Britain, America and anywhere else in the world where English is spoken.

The problems that are encountered in English speaking countries by foreign students, such as difficulties with understanding sub-standard English or unfamiliarity with modern technologies, social patterns and local realities, are problems which are encountered by anybody who moves to an unfamiliar setting, even in his own country. These are experiential problems concerning not only language but also the world knowledge, including non-verbal experiences. I think that language teachers cannot totally reduce a cultural shock their students may experience in the target language country. Moreover, I claim that EL teaching methods and materials can be only of limited help in solving these problems.

Apart from the inappropriate roles our students are required to play in communicative discussion classes, we frequently find that

the actual discussion **content** is irrelevant to EFL students` needs.

One of the things that students always bring with them to the FL classroom is their cultural background. The cultural background should be somehow taken account of in the choice of discussion topics. One of the speakers in a panel discussion said a few years ago:"until we can work out an adequate way of contextualizing English in a non-British or non-American way,(...)we are stuck with the difficulty of cultural background: there will undoubtedly be some sort of mismatch between the culture of the textbook and the culture of the students" (White 1983:240).

There is obviously a theory of **acculturation** behind British and American culture contexts in EL teaching materials. Yet, as is suggested by Schumann, the acculturation model may not apply in foreign language teaching contexts, where an **enculturation** model is needed (Schumann 1985). According to this hypothesis FL students do not acquire a foreign language proportionally to the assimilation of the FL culture. Their FL acquisition is related to the assimilation of a system of norms and values of educated people in their own culture. Besides it is generally acknowledged that becoming bilingual does not necessarily imply becoming bicultural (cf.Alptekin C.and M. 1984).

In my opinion the following topics, taken as examples from advanced oral practice books published in Britain, are totally inappropriate for discussion classes with Polish students:

a/ What would you do about unemployment?

b/ Do you agree that religion is the opium for the people?

c/ Should contraceptives be used?

d/ Should military service be abolished?

e/ Argue for or against advertising.

f/ Argue for or against living in a tall block of flats.

Our students are not prepared to discuss some topics in public, they may be too personal, taboo or they involve political issues, which are not discussed in class (a,b, c , d). Other topics are inappropriate because they refer to the reality which is unfamiliar to our students (e) or they require that the students

argue for or against something, whereas in reality they are not given any choice (f).

In my opinion what EFL students need are topics which are general enough to have some appeal both to our students and to native speakers of English. I believe that there are many such topics referring to common human experience.

Moreover, it is not sufficient to give the students a topic and leave them to discuss it. They do not develop their linguistic competence in this way because they usually fall back on more simplified language. Teaching materials should not only give lists of appropriate discussion topics but they should also provide authentic discussions on these topics, involving native participants. Our students should be able to listen to a recording of native speakers` discussion on a related subject, so that they could **model** their language on what they have just heard, at the same time using the target language creatively by expressing their own views on the subject.

One of my most successful discussion classes was preceded by listening to a panel discussion, recorded from a BBC program, in which some chosen questions were answered by a panel of experts. Our specific question was concerned with a role model for a contemporary girl. Since 90 per cent of our students are girls, they were vividly interested in what the British views on this subject were like.

After listening twice to the recorded discussion and explaining difficult vocabulary and culturally marked phrases, I asked my students to prepare a similar discussion. Then they all expressed their views, which were recorded on a tape. Later we listened again to the original discussion and the students` opinions. Finally we tried to draw some general conclusions concerning differences and similarities between the British speakers` opinions and the Polish students` views.

Thus, EL teaching materials should provide the EFL teacher with relevant discussion topics, preceded by introductory, authentic discussion contexts. Discussion topics should be relevant to social and cultural experiences of the students, simultaneously

giving them insights into different social and cultural contexts.

I suggest that communicative EFL teaching materials provide glossed texts of general interest, followed by recorded native speakers` discussions related to the subject of the texts. Such teaching materials can develop the skill of discussion by actually stimulating non-native students to take part in it.

Let me conclude these remarks by appealing to textbook writers to include EFL teaching situations in their materials, to make role-play activities more realistic for EFL students and to make discussion topics more relevant to them, simultaneously providing them with authentic language input.

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